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Jackson Covey
jaksincovey@siu.edu

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The Politics of a Photograph
Jackson Covey

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Photography, as a technology, benefits from an assumption of truth found in no other mediums. (Benovsky, 379) Common understanding is that the photographer is operating a machine and presumably capturing objectively. This view doesn't account for the necessary and narrative decisions that go in to the creation of a single still image. (Benovsky, 383) Even an image captured by a human eye is effected by a number of factors that alter the perspective, sharpness, and tones perceived. (Benovsky, 376) Necessary decisions like aperture, shutter speed, angle, focus, development and framing all shape the image created and its meaning, yet none take away from the truth that what is captured is objectively real and in front of the lens. (Benevsky, 383) The photographers make these decisions with the intent of preserving facts but when truth isn't entirely separate from perspective and opinion, decisions made by the photographer will shape facts in a way that favors one side or the other. These necessary decisions are made on the basis of the conditions of the project. (Grayson, 314) Every image holds the ideological perspective of the photographer and that dictates the story that will be told. Photographers also have to consider their customer, equipment capabilities, and any time and access restrictions. (Grayson, 315) The way these decisions are made plays a major role in shaping public opinion of the subject. Public opinion in turn shapes the outcomes of wars, elections, and policy that create change much larger than the scene in front of the camera.

Roger Fenton documented the Crimean War of 1853 as the first commercial photographer to cover such a conflict. With just three years' experience, he was hired by Thomas Agnew and Henry Pelham-Clinton, a publisher and Britain's Secretary of State for War to make images that could be shown off to prominent figures and sold as prints to a commercial audience. Fenton's commercial and political audiences wouldn't have found much use for graphic battlefield images. Fenton, hoping to please his client, brought back images of men in the camps,

ships in the harbor, and cannonballs on the side of a road but never a single image of a dead body. (Goldberg) Including the bodies would have created a better document of the war for future generations and given both leaders and the public a better understanding of the events taking place. Leaving out the details of battle was an artistic and journalistic compromise that distorted the reality of war. However, it did please his financiers who wanted commercially viable work that evoked patriotism and optimism about the prospects of victory. Fenton's self-censorship may have deprived the public of many powerful images but it established war photography as a viable market. (Seels, 3)

Fenton captured two famous images during the Crimean War, both of which he named *Valley of the Shadow of Death*. The images were captured in a barren valley where many cannonballs landed during a battle which was still ongoing in other areas. In one image, cannonballs are lined up fairly neatly along the side of a dirt road running through the middle. In the other they are scattered across the road as if they hadn't been moved since they landed. It is widely believed that the cannonballs were originally moved in order to clear the road for passage. Fenton had an assistant position them back into the road in order to produce a better visual representation of the battle. His decision has been questioned by photographers ever since. Many argue that his repositioning takes the level of involvement beyond just necessary decisions. While there was no hard rule on what was acceptable to alter, it is widely held today, particularly in documentary work, that falsifying to change meaning is wrong. (Grayson, 323)

Fenton's staged photograph probably was not far off from what the valley looked like before the cannonballs were first moved out of the road. Moving the cannonballs back to their approximate original locations could be seen as creating a more accurate portrayal of the discovered scene. He was hired to show the war as an experience. If a less authentic image captured the experience

more accurately than that was the image he needed. Sharing an experience can mean more than just mechanical, journalistic documentation. (Morris)

Fenton's work was created in an era that did not have the professional expectations of photography that we have grown accustomed to today. Although photographs were not included in news media yet, his work was intended to be representative of the warfront. His pieces were seen by kings and queens along with a variety of other powerful members of government. Seeing the aftermath for themselves, even in a censored version, played a vital role in shaping the popular view of a war fought so far away that most never saw it with their own eyes.

Photography allowed for an accurate, more scientific view than other mediums like painting or drawing could achieve. With that visual accuracy comes an assumption of truth. The photographer must take one of two approaches. They can stay in the journalistic line of practice and document with minimal bias or make a strong and convincing partisan case on behalf of their favored side. One of these options is to continue as a journalist and the other as a propagandist. Keeping the two distinct allows for objective news and effective propaganda. Any cross between the two is either ineffective propaganda or biased news. Both are bad options. Fenton's alterations changed the content but not the narrative or its implications. It did not change their physical understanding of the battle, as the cannonballs really did scatter in that area during the battle. It did not change the meaning either. Both represented a deadly battle where cannons were used. It did not ultimately effect either sides resolve any differently than it would have or misrepresent the outcome of the battle. At most Fenton can be accused of staging a shot he missed. This would break with the norms of today, but not of the era in which it was produced which is the standard we must judge it by.

In photography's early days, images were captured using a wet plate collodion process. This requires darkroom access nearby for plates to be sensitized and processed within the 20 minutes that the process remains viable. This was especially difficult for war photographers who are typically far from home and their usual facilities. The use of small, mobile darkrooms allowed war photographers like Fenton and Brady to prepare and process wet plates on site. Even when producing images in the field became easier, using wet plates for mass reproduction remained impossible. Both the tintype and ambrotype processes, the most popular displaying methods, required the negative to be incorporated in a single positive. Individual portraits were often sent back home to families to hold on to as keepsakes. Photographers, without the use of print publications or other distribution methods, displayed their work in exhibitions. These shows were not particularly well attended and their reach was mainly local. Exhibitions had a mix of portraits and images of the tragic aftermath of battles. Action shots were not yet possible, as exposure times could be anywhere from 10 to 30 seconds up to the minutes. (Seels, 4) These long exposures meant that skies had to be blown out and any people captured had to be perfectly still to get any clarity, which meant expressions and postures that could be maintained for the entire exposure. (Pauwels, 482)

The generation that experienced the Civil War had little interest in reliving it through photographs. Both sides glorified the war as a righteous battle between good and evil and believed their side was blameless. The general population did not want to have these views challenged. (Seels, 5) Being a Civil War photographer became so financially difficult that Mathew Brady, the most accomplished Civil War photographer, was struggling to afford to preserve his work. He was forced to sell off his work to the government for \$2,840, far less than it was worth but was later given 25,000 by congress after President Garfield intervened on his

behalf. (Seels, 6) The halftone process came in to use just as the next generation were coming of age, around the 1880's and 90's. This process allowed for printed images using varying spacing and sizing of black dots. Its implementation allowed publications, primarily newspapers, to include and mass produce imagery. The next generation had not suffered the traumas of war directly and were more open to the images and the lessons the images contained. This exposure gave Americans a renewed appreciation of the human cost of war. (Seels, 6) Taking the time to understand and examine Civil War images led to the discovery that many of the original captions were inaccurate. Mislabeled photographs, whether by mistake or fraudulent, are misleading and distort both the significance and meaning of the image. They falsify historical record and distort our understanding of events. Although not available to a national audience at the time of publication, a miswritten label could cause a leader, either military or political, to question the accuracy of information sources. This confusion would take up valuable resources in evaluating the information and depending on the decisions made, could change the course of history. Over the course of the coming years, efforts were taken to check and correct captions wherever possible. Collecting correct information within such a short time after the Civil War era gave historians the ability to locate and record correct information with an accuracy that might not have been possible today. We owe the accuracy and detail of our records today to this process. (Seels, 7)

When modern viewers look at Civil War photography, we see it through the eyes of a 21st century American. Our modern understanding of what photography is and is not hadn't yet developed. Besides the creative liberties taken with captions, photographers in the 1860's were known to position bodies in to dramatic positions to make a better narrative image, much like Fenton and the cannonballs. The positioning was not controversial or even discussed at the time.

There were simply no existing norms against it. (Seels, 5) Photographic truth is the concept that journalistic and documentary photography should represent scenes and objects as found without interfering, particularly to improve the appeal of an image or change the meaning. One of the earliest debates centered around Daguerre's staged Self Portrait of a Drowned Man, the first staged photograph, in 1840 but had not reached wider audiences in the two decades between. In the modern era, norms keeps photographers from changing the reality of a scene in any way, especially in ways that might be seen as inflammatory or deceitful. The concept is widely accepted today by journalists and documentarian. In the days of the Civil War, creating a better illustration of the war for your family or local exhibitions seemed like an acceptable choice. Creating visually interesting narrative shots gave your viewer a better illustration as long as you did not change meaning. A better illustration tells your story more effectively, sells more photographs, and brings more people in to exhibitions to see the work and spreads your views. This shift in norms is important to recognize since many of the images intended for the Civil War audience are widely available to modern audiences. (Seels, 8)

Advances in technology have made modern war photographs available to the general public almost immediately after they are captured. Viewers are constantly exposed to war when we glance at the TV, newspapers, or any other media sources. Whether it is coverage of world events or a fictional piece, the public is exposed to weapons and violence in ways unimaginable to our ancestors. This constant exposure leads viewers to be less effected by each individual instance. (Seels, 8) Modern viewers have an ability to filter through the violence and death to get through each day. An image will not break through this barrier and get to a viewer unless it is either particularly shocking, demonstrates a technical advance, or both like in the case of Robert Capa's *Death of a Loyalist Soldier*.

Propaganda images lead us believe that the individual or individuals presented are representative of a larger group. Viewers assume that the individual presented has any and all distinguishing features of the group and that anything distinguishing about the individual is representative of the whole. (Brothers, 35) In images of the Spanish Civil War, as in most cultures, the values of bravery and sacrifice were demonstrated wherever possible. War photography aims to take the complexities of the conflict and trim them down to just one moment where all positive traits are exemplified and any negative traits are minimized, giving us a newer and more relevant example of the same warrior image we have seen over and over throughout history. (Brothers, 36; Brothers 76) Although the finer details shift to match the sensibilities of the culture, many features of the warrior image stay the same. The soldier is typically portrayed as a brave and responsible citizen, honoring their duty to protect their nation and doing so with pride. Typically they will be masculine and demonstrate any and all favorable physical traits while remaining generic enough for anyone viewing the image to identify with the subject. They must show confidence and proficiency with their weapon and not show a hint of fear or doubt even to the moment of death. A propaganda photo subject must be what a nation wants their military to be as they are the public representation of the military.

The most famous image to fit in to this mold is Robert Capa's *Death of a Loyalist Soldier*. In the image, a man appears to be running down a hill when he is shot in the head and begins to fall backward. The photographer is close by and captures the exact moment when the bullet hits. Capa captured the nation's attention with the technological achievement of capturing such an action shot. (Brothers, 180)

Muybridge, with the help of Stanford's railroad technicians, developed instantaneous shutter technology in 1877 and 78, just over a decade after the end of the American Civil War.

This new tech cut the length of an exposure down to fractions of a second and gave photographers the ability to freeze motion. (Pauwels, 482) Between 1878 and the beginning of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 the technology was made more compact and widely available, yet still was not the standard for use in the field. When Capa began documenting the Spanish Civil War, he used a 35 mm Leica, which unlike the bulky Graflex cameras most used, was small and easy to use. This allowed Capa to get in better positions and avoid being noticed as much as possible which was a huge advantage on the battlefield. (Capa, 11) He was able to get close, and with the development in shutter technology, freeze action, producing war shots the likes of which had never been seen. With the halftone image reproduction technology available by this point, they were able to share it far and wide.

In the first of the five wars he would go on to cover, Capa became known for getting right up close to the action with his Leica and still staying entirely focused on his work with little regard for the danger surrounding him. (Capa, 10) His lightweight equipment and fearless demeanor allowed him to capture a sense of intimacy with his subjects beyond what his competition could produce and the public was accustomed to. Capa's most famous shot, *Death of a Loyalist Soldier* is a prime example. "What this image argued was that death in war was heroic, and tragic, and that the individual counted and that his death mattered" (Brothers, 183) He showed death, the worst possible outcome, in a way that was inspiring and patriotic to the public and potential soldiers back home. Capa's image made his subject perfectly fit into the mold of the perfect soldier. The soldier's death was used as a recruiting tool to get more Spanish citizens to join the fight.

Capa's personal philosophies were fighting their own battles within his work. He was a pacifist, yet whole heartedly believed in winning a righteous war. He photographed to give

viewers the same cognitive dissidence. Using a small handheld camera allowed him to get close, allowing his audience to see the faces, expressions, and actions of each subject. Being able to see faces forces the viewer recognize and at least at some level identify with the soldiers of both sides. Although his favored side always comes out as the most glorious and sympathetic, he had a deep desire for the public to understand the cost of war to both sides. Although against the continuing death and destruction, his intent was not to demoralize his own people but to push them in the direction of concluding the conflict, either peace or decisive victory. Whichever would end the killing quicker. In *Death of a Loyalist Soldier* Capa's conflicting views are highlighted in a wide open, natural landscape. The death and destruction juxtaposed with a serene nature scene. The soldier is faithfully playing his role, dying facing the enemy with his gun still in hand. His back is straight and eyes forward even to the moment of death highlighting his deep patriotic resolve. The soldier's fighting spirit serves as a model for those to come after him. However, he is alone. We do not see any of his allies carrying on the fight or the enemy who took his life. We only see the one man in his moment of death. Whether they be on the other side of the hill and about to meet the same fate or far away in another area of the battle, when he went down the only person beside him was a photographer. Capa is showing us how even as part of a larger battle, army, war, and country, death is personal and individual. The individual must answer to themselves as to whether the cause was worth the price.

Women were only permitted to fight on the front lines for 8 short months at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War but the move carried a significance that would endure. (Brothers, 77) The women of the Spanish Republican Army were photographed and their inclusion was presented to the people as a drastic measure in a time of emergency. (Lannon, 222) Women served in all sorts of positions within the Spanish Army, carrying out the exact same jobs as the

men. (Lines, 171) Often, in addition, they were expected to do what were considered the traditional female tasks of cleaning and cooking. (Lannon, 222) At the beginning, the Spanish government presented the new female soldiers in the same way they presented the men; as tough fighters in traditional uniforms. They were shown in an equal light, doing their jobs in an equally brave manner. (Brothers, 76) This broke with the traditional Spanish Catholic portrayal of women, especially in war time where they were traditionally seen as “stoic sufferers or the victims of war”. While the move was intended to brand the Republican side as progressive and broad participation as necessary for victory, many men found it absurd to see women competently carrying out tasks typically reserved for men. (Brothers, 76)

One story highlighted in the news was a fabricated account of a real female soldier that the paper referred to as Camila the Spanish Amazon. The Daily Herald on October 17th, 1936 told a heroic story of Camila rising to the occasion in the heat of battle. The article recounts her tale. She was told by a superior officer to be like the fabled Amazon warrior women who were willing to disfigure their bodies by cutting off a breast to hold a rifle easier and gain an advantage in battle. Her conformity to the male standards is seen as something to be praised and emulated by the other female soldiers. In the article, Camila is praised for having all of the necessary characteristics needed to be an excellent soldier just like the men. This is enlightening as to the views of the journalist and paper as well as the political powers influencing them, as the account was entirely of the papers creation. No such officer told a story to Camilla, therefore the story of the Amazon women is not just an account but a targeted message to any women that might want to join the war effort. They would need to be willing to go above and beyond what was expected of the men in order to prove themselves. (Brothers, 80) The writers message was undermined by the accompanying image. In the image, Camila is dancing in a feminine way in

uniform in front of the other soldiers, putting her in the role of entertainment, unprofessional, or at least on unequal footing with the men. The photographer capturing this scene either showed up at the wrong time, captured the scene truthfully, and did not consider the meanings that might be associated with it or staged the scene to conform with typical catholic gender roles of the time. Assuming the image is staged, one might assume that the papers intent was to balance a fairly progressive message in the article with a disarming, more traditional visual. While many in power saw women in battle as necessary and patriotic, these traditional catholic values were still very much part of the culture and Spain was deeply divided on gender roles. (Brothers, 80)

In the years leading up to the Spanish Civil War, progress on the rights of women was steadily rolled back. Women's rights were being taken away in areas like education, citizenship, and marriage in favor of a more traditional male-dominated society. "It would be hard, and wrong, to evade the conclusion that one of the important issues at stake in the Spanish Civil War was the future position -legal, economic, and cultural- of women" (Lannon, 215) When war broke out in 1936, the women of Spain saw the ideological rift not only between Communists and Socialists, but also between those who saw a future for women participating in society on more equal terms with men and those who saw traditional gender roles as the only proper way. This is key to understanding why women rushed to the front lines and why their participation was met with mixed reactions by the general population. Artists like Rey Vila, also known as Sim, drew heroic images of women and men fighting along-side each other in battle. With black and primary colors used in sharp, bold strokes, Sim created iconic representations of the militia groups he followed. As an anarchist, Sim's sympathies were to the CNT/FAI, which can be seen in his dramatic use of their colors, black and red, as the main color scheme in many pieces. His images gained widespread international attention for both Sim and the war effort. They were

featured on numerous propaganda posters and in his widely reproduced book, *Estampas de la Revolucion*. Sim's is still one of the main bodies of work associated with Spain's Civil War, alongside Picasso's *Guernica*. (Lannon, 217) Thanks to his use of a pseudonym during the war, afterwards he was able to cover subjects and go places he may have been unwelcome otherwise. Other posters displayed by the Republican forces around camps warned militia men that if they had sex with the militia women, the male soldiers would catch VD or another sexually transmitted disease. (Lannon, 222) These posters and similar sexist messages from within the leadership and from prominent members of the more conservative population eventually won out over the feminists. After the first few months, women were shifted in to non-combat, support roles and a greater emphasis was put on women fulfilling the jobs the men had left open back home. (Lannon, 221) In March of 1937, after the Battle of Guadalajara, women started receiving orders to leave the front lines. (Brothers, 77) By July, the majority had been removed from combat. (Lines, 168) In September of 1936, the Prime Minister asked them to leave the front entirely. (Lannon, 222) The Republicans would eventually succumb to Franco's forces, but the women lost their war much earlier. (Lannon, 224)

One particularly influential figure in Spain and particularly in the discussion around female soldiers, Dolores Ibárruri, was known as *La Pasionaria* which translates to the passionflower. Ibárruri was particularly skilled at controlling public perception, which allowed for her rise to power quickly in a time when very few women had those sorts of opportunities. In addition to *La Pasionaria*'s awe inspiring public speaking skills, her methods relied heavily on visual representation. *La Pasionaria* began life in a small mine town. She married a miner and had six children, two of whom survived. In 1931, Dolores left her husband and moved to the Madrid with her children. Being a strong, independent woman from a mining town, Ibárruri was

able to capitalize on the stereotype of a “village woman”. The concept of a village woman is based in the biblical concept of original sin. Eve first bit in to the apple and brought evil in to the world, so women have to make sure they are strong enough to choose the righteous path “through sacrifice, work, and self denial”. (Llana) La Pasionaria further cultivated this image of herself as hard working and sacrificial for her entire life. Being from a mining town meant Ibárruri could possess many traits typically reserved for men with fewer social repercussions. Spanish miners were known for their bravery and integrity, due to both the tough working conditions and tense labor-management relations. In 1919, Ibárruri began writing for local socialist publications but feared people would not take her seriously so she created the pseudonym La Pasionaria. Using a pseudonym allowed her to build up a reputation for strong political positions and clear thought anonymously, without putting her and her families safety and reputation on the line. She switched sides in 1920, from socialism to communism well before communism began picking up momentum. (Llana)

In a feature about her in *Estampa Magazine*, Ibárruri is shown standing in her home with a book, speaking in government, with her children, and washing clothes. (Añibarro) The interview primarily focused on where she was from and how her prominence as a leader in the communist party was impacted by her gender. The goal of the piece was clearly to build her village woman image and to emphasize her humble roots. The images included are of two distinct lines. In some she is shown cleaning her home and around her children and many others to highlight her limited conformity to traditional gender roles in an effort to appeal to conservative Catholics and those that might object to deviation from a traditional lifestyle. She is shown in two images with a book and in one she is in her professional role, speaking as a representative of the Communist party. She was also political leader and thought leader and these

traits needed to be shown in juxtaposition to the domestic scenes to introduce the dichotomy. The piece mentions that her hair was beginning to turn grey which may have been just an observation or possibly to endow her with the wisdom and authority of age. She was still living with her husband at this point yet he is not seen anywhere. I believe this to be a political decision on her part, in order to present herself as independent in her space, whichever role she was filling. Her husband was away at work and not presenting a challenge to her dominance in the images. Either way she is clearly master of her domain and building her carefully and precisely built public image that would take her to the top of the Communist party in Spain. (Añibarro)

As her profile rose, her village identity grew in to something more specific to her. She became known as the Mother of the Spanish Communist Party. This new identity of the suffering and sacrificing mother comes both from her personal experience of losing children as much as her role in the communist party and was built off of the Catholic Mother Mary. The sacrificial role was more than just symbolic. Ibárruri sacrificed time with her children for her political career. She would time their sleep patterns as babies to her work schedule and leave them to take care of themselves for much of their upbringing. Eventually she sent them away to the USSR in 1935 for safety and eventually joined them there after the Communists lost the war to Franco, not to return until after his death. (Llana)

In later portraits, La Pasionaria is typically seen in her distinctive black, simple clothing, looking either at the camera or slightly off. She is smiling when not speaking and has her hair neat and back with very simple round earrings. This strict adherence to typical portrait norms and conservative, subdued clothing of the time may represent the emphasis placed on unity and conformity in reserved cultures, especially those associated with communism. As a female leader in a time where there were few, Ibárruri struck a delicate balance between downplaying her

gender as to avoid the discussion and distractions associated with a deviation from norms, while also not appearing to be rejecting her gender and cultural tradition. For many, Ibárruri represented the grieving mothers who had sent their children to die in the war. Her style, with its dark and formal tones in many ways allowed her to embody this role. Although her own children were safely outside the country, as a strong leader she made it clear that when her people suffered, she suffered. The leaders, particularly in such a collectivist society, take on the events that happen to their people.

Much like La Pasionaria, President Trump's success in the 2016 election relied heavily on image. As a real estate developer, he benefited from the assumption that business men are experienced with budgets and staff decisions. Many believed his wealth and celebrity to indicate that he had made these decisions well. (Barry, 46) By being photographed and filmed for his television show, the Apprentice, he was able to establish many of these traits in the eyes of the American public years before declaring his intention to run for office. His propaganda campaign began before the president himself was even aware. His complete lack of experience in the field of politics meant that he was free of much of the scandal and negative associations that are often inevitable for those with a long career in the field. (Barry, 47) Unlike many celebrities, President Trump had avoided both alcohol and cigarettes and maintained a close relationship with his children, who were rarely far from his side on the campaign trail, particularly when the cameras were around. (Barry, 46) Although these are a carefully selected group of facts that exclude his numerous personal scandals and negative traits, this is how he presented himself to his base and no matter how brashly he spoke or what the media he and his followers distrusted revealed about his personal character, he could always somewhat comfortably fall back on the business man and family man images. His policies, isolationist and business oriented, and his public image were

attractive enough for his base to overlook the racial, authoritarian, and narcissistic aspects of the platform. (Barry, 46) As Trump stepped on stage on election night to give a speech, his son Baron and Vice President Pence were at his side as President Trump spoke about applying his business skills to the task ahead. Surrounded by flags, in one moment he was business man, president, and family man, fully representing the complicated persona he had successfully developed in the eyes of his followers.

Understanding the politics of a photograph can be difficult. There are many factors to break down in order to get the entire picture. Photographic truth, being the complicated beast that it is, consists of many necessary and potentially unnecessary decisions. The way these decisions are made for an image dictates the message it will deliver. One must consider the technology available for both capture and distribution, as the photographer can only make use of the tools available. The individual or organization paying the bills of a project and their motives must be considered in addition to the photographers' feelings and views in regards to the subject and the social implications. Often these views and how they are handled will indicate whether the work seeks to be objective documentary or argumentative propaganda. Who is being represented and to whom, whether they are to be glorified or scorned, will dictate the narrative of the image. When the individual being captured is a personality larger than life, in the cases of La Pasionaria and President Trump, very few of these decisions are left up to the photographer and the images take shape almost automatically. The personality and narrative has been shaped long before the photographer arrives and whether we love them or hate them, all we can do is watch.

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